

Congregational Polity Essay Part A, by Marge Powell

Note: bolded text is the emphasis of the author of this document

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<p>A. Congregational polity per se</p> <p>Polity defined: Polity is the operational and governance structure of a church. It also denotes the ministerial structure of a church and the authority relationships between churches. The type of polity also denotes ownership of congregational assets.</p> <p>Source: Wikipedia</p> <p>It is a principle of congregational polity that ministers do not govern congregations by themselves. They may preside over the congregation, but it is the congregation which exerts its authority in the end.</p> <p>“The Unitarian Universalist Association hereby declares and affirms the independence and autonomy of local churches, fellowships, and associate members; and nothing in this constitution or in the By-Laws of the Association shall be deemed to infringe upon the congregational polity of churches and fellowships. . . .”</p> <p>Source: the 1961 constitution of the newly formed UUA</p>	<p>“We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of love.” (Principles will be called “values”.) The Six Values: interdependence, justice, equity, generosity, pluralism, transformation.</p> <p>Source: Proposed Amendment to Article 2</p> <p>“We have developed a mythology about how we are governed that claims complete autonomy of both congregations and individuals within congregations, this is not what the Cambridge Platform upon which our polity is based states.”</p> <p>Source: Commission on Institutional Change (COIC) report</p> <p>Comment:</p> <p>The Cambridge Platform has been changed at least 7 times since 1648.</p> <p>This is a link to the Cambridge Platform:</p> <p>https://archive.org/details/cambridgeplatfo00goog/page/n6/mode/2up</p> <p>Rev. Sue Phillips speaks, writes, and preaches widely about congregational polity. The UUA relies on her opinions of polity. She was UUA’s Regional Lead for New England. She led vision and strategy for the New England staff team as they served the 231 congregations in Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island. She was widely expected to become UUA president in the 2017 election. However, she dropped out after the race had started, leaving only 1 candidate.</p> <p>In a recorded workshop at GA 2015, she made these comments: Her talk was strongly theist.</p>

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	<p>“Believing that congregational polity is primarily concerned with supporting and protecting individual voices and congregations is nothing less than heresy. Yes, I just called it heresy. And not in the cute renegade sort of way. I mean in the literal way—like apostasy—the renunciation or abandonment of a religious principle. Equating congregational polity with autonomy undermines our interconnectedness, erodes our covenant, and endangers our communities. It is flat-out ahistorical, not to mention wrong.”</p> <p>“These are the sins inspired by our collective tolerance for this heresy. Countless faithful people have left our faith after being turned off, demoralized, or even victimized by these behaviors. Countless more have visited our congregations and never come back. The only people who want to join communities that deify individual voices are people who want to be deified.”</p> <p>Source: https://www.uua.org/leaderlab/congregational-polity-and-myth-congregational-autonomy</p>
<p>B. Unitarian Membership</p> <p>Covenants are congregational. We practice the 4th principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And the 5th principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and society at large.</p> <p>Currently, if you sign the book, agree to the principles, and support the congregation, you are a member.</p>	<p>In the same talk:</p> <p>“It’s a bold thing to claim that people can’t really be Unitarian Universalist by themselves. . . . Our faith is practiced in covenanted community. Individual beliefs may constitute spirituality, but they are not religious. They are not Unitarian Universalist.”</p> <p>“Covenant—mutual covenant—is the missing link in our understanding of congregational polity. Congregational polity is not the autonomy of individual congregations but the covenanted communion of autonomous churches. This community doesn’t do “membership”. They do “covenant,” and that covenant is so strong that each covenant partner accepts responsibility for reaching out in Love to those who wander from the covenant by word or deed. They do this not because they want to punish each other but because they believe no one should ever ‘be cut off from the privileges of the covenant.’”</p> <p>Source: https://www.uua.org/leaderlab/congregational-polity-and-myth-congregational-autonomy</p>

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<p>Covenant definitions:</p> <p>“ a part of a formal written agreement in which it is stated what must or must not be done, or in which someone promises to do or pay something” – Cambridge dictionary</p> <p>“a binding promise of far-reaching importance in the relations between individuals, groups, and nations” - Britannica</p> <p>We currently have no covenants with other congregations. What exactly will be expected of us? What definition of love is being used? What exactly are we building with this foundation?</p>	<p>Comment:</p> <p>This statement implies someone is charged with the task of calling out members who are “out of covenant.” Who does this? What are the criteria? How is love defined? What will be required of both the member making the judgement and the member allegedly out of covenant?</p> <p>There are 7 covenant statements in section C 2.2 of the amendment to article 2. This is the 1st covenant statement:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love.
<p>C. Membership</p> <p>Our congregations are open to all who accept the 7 principles.</p>	<p>Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.</p> <p>Source Amendment 2 section c2.2</p> <p>Comment:</p> <p>Discipline of Love. Capitalized “Love” refers to a charge to the Commission On Institutional Change. It implies action defined as anti-racism activism.</p> <p>“We strive to be an association of congregations that truly welcome all persons <u>who share our values.</u>”</p> <p>Source: Section C 2.4 proposed amendment to bylaws</p> <p>“Another focus of opposition is that the change eliminates the 7 principles and the sources that undergird them. Allegedly, the “values and covenant” section incorporates the principles’ core ideas, but it mentions them almost as an afterthought. The principles and sources have served as the theological core of UUism. Their elimination moves</p>

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	<p>UUism away from being a liberal religion with a theological core, to being a social justice organization focused mainly on politically-oriented calls to action. Opponents do not want to lose the religiosity of UUism.”</p> <p>“The new inclusion section now limits our welcome to “all persons who share our values.” The current statement says we truly welcome all persons. Critics are unhappy with this limitation and its rejection of tolerance and inclusion which have always been hallmarks of UUism.”</p> <p>Source: quoted from download of Pro / Con Review – Saving Unitarian Universalism (savethe7principles.org)</p> <p>Comment:</p> <p>Members and congregations are inseparable from one another. Members and congregations will be held accountable. As UUA President Rev, Sofia Betancourt said at GA 2022, "Covenant without consequences is not covenant". Because congregations as a whole can be held accountable for being out of covenant, that means someone above the congregation, someone else in UU, would have the responsibility for making that decision.</p> <p>Because of being held accountable for living the values, ambiguity of words such as accountability and love is a problem. There is no objectivity or criteria.</p> <p>Now we will only welcome persons who share our values.</p>
<p>D. Widening the Circle of Concern</p> <p>At the 2020 virtual General Assembly the Commission on Institutional Change (COIC) released its final report entitled Widening the Circle of Concern. This report was commissioned by the UUA Board of Trustees in April 2017 when they declared that the UUA was based on white supremacy culture.</p>	<p>Comment:</p> <p>Two major themes of the report are accountability and harm.</p> <p>“no shared accountability structures and processes are in place to hold people accountable for the continued harming of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color among us.”</p>

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	<p>Source: preface Widening the Circle of Concern</p> <p>“Living into the Power of We ... holds us accountable to repairing the legacy of theological harm we perpetrated against some in our community . . .”</p> <p>Source: Widening the Circle of Concern, “Centering Theology: A Conversation about Faith, Race, Liberalism, Part 4,” 13.</p> <p>“Unitarian Universalist congregations and other organizations must also be more skilled at being accountable to groups rather than to individuals.”</p> <p>Source: Widening the Circle of Concern “Living our Values in the World,” 72</p> <p>Provide learning circles and virtual learning circles for groups of white people interested in learning how to be accountable to Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color and co-journeying with them. ‘</p> <p>Source: Widening the Circle of Concern “Innovations and Risk-Taking,” 105</p> <p>More Accountability. “Another issue with the current Article 2 is the lack of accountability. The revision is intended to see to it that “people do what they have promised” by saying that “we are accountable to one another for doing the work...” “We covenant to...” is a stronger statement than just “affirm and promote.” Each of the values has its own covenant. Proponents of the change say the UUA needs the authority to hold people and congregations accountable. Even though the change is not as explicit as some of the earlier proposals, the statement of accountability can be interpreted to mean that UUs can somehow hold other UUs accountable. The specifics have not been identified yet.”</p> <p>“Opponents object to the proposed “accountability” that is strongly implied in the rewrite. Who would exercise that kind of authority? What would be the consequences for violations? What sort of appeal processes would a person have? Would the UUA hold individuals accountable, or whole congregations? Would congregations be expected to set up “accountability” boards to see if members are “doing</p>

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	<p>the work” of achieving the values? The accountability parts of the rewrite are totally premature.”</p> <p>“The revision requires that members covenant to “do the work” of living out the seven values rather than just “affirm and promote. UU leaders have de-fellowshipped at least two ministers on the grounds that they are “out of covenant” because of claims that books written or things said are inconsistent with UU values.¹¹ This is an insertion of authoritarianism that is completely out of step with our UU heritage.”</p> <p>Source: quoted from download of Pro / Con Review – Saving Unitarian Universalism (savethe7principles.org)</p> <p>The 4th covenant statement of Section C 2.2 states:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions within our congregation [sic] and the society at large. <p>Comment: There are many social justice issues. Is racism the only issue that will be supported? Why just systemic oppression?</p> <p>The 7th covenant statement of Section C 2.2 states:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities. <p>Comment:</p> <p>What is the commitment here? How is community defined?</p>
<p>E. De- emphasis on individualism</p>	<p>More Community, Less Individualism. “Remarks at the 2023 General Assembly where the proposed change was endorsed by an overwhelming majority, asserted that the current 7 principles, sources, and the “freedom of belief” sections place too much importance on individualism. The principle affirming a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” has been less free and less individualistic with this proposed change: “We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. “It doesn’t say we “listen” to one another, but that we “learn.” The transformation clause says that we</p>

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	<p>'covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically'."</p> <p>More Interdependence, Less Independence. "Closely related to the move away from individualism toward the collective is the effort to increase a sense of interdependence with a corresponding decrease in independence and individual freedom. The principle affirming freedom of belief and right of individual conscience was opposed at General Assembly by several speakers."</p> <p>Asset-Based Anti-Racism. "One of the most frequent arguments used by those who want the new Article 2 is that it will enable UUism to be more effective in its anti-racist work. Opponents of the change disagree. Opponents point out that social science and behavioral research has not shown "guilt-based" strategies to be effective in reducing racism."</p> <p>"The current UUA strategy emphasizes "shame and blame," "confess your racism," "all white people are racist," and accusations of "white supremacy culture" within congregations. This type of inward-looking "clean the ranks" strategy is common to authoritarian ideological movements, but opponents of the change say it not only is ineffective, but it is not worthy of an inclusive, tolerant, freedom-loving religious movement grounded in reason, rationality, logic, evidence, science, compassion, fairness, and facts. This approach seems to be based on Robin DiAngelo's interpretation of critical race theory. Proponents maintain that UUism is "swimming in White Supremacy Culture" which now has been broadened to include all of Western Enlightenment. Opponents want to shift anti-racist work away from the divisive "blame and shame" approach that considers skin color to be the defining characteristic of a person to an "asset-based" anti-racist strategy. Asset-based anti-racism contends that actual incidents of racism of every form need to be identified and all available assets of the people involved are then mobilized to eliminate them. Abandoning freedom of speech, press, association, individual expression, science-based evidence, logic, reason and other "enlightenment values" as the rewrite of Article 2 proposes, would take away the primary weapons marginalized people have always used to gain freedom and equality. Opponents of the proposed new Article 2 want to avoid "safetyism"</p>

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	<p>where people are once again segregated by race with each advocating for its own cause, but instead create alliances so that black, brown, and white people all work together.⁹ Opponents tend toward the ideas and strategies of Martin Luther King rather than those of critical race theorists.”</p> <p>“The revision still has a section called “Freedom of Belief.” It says that “congregational freedom of belief and the individual’s right of conscience are central to our Unitarian Universalist heritage.” (Emphasis added). That statement does not provide for a continuing commitment to freedom of belief, individual right of conscience, or to congregational freedom! The title of the section implies freedom of belief, but the text does not endorse it except as a part of UU heritage.”</p> <p>Source: quoted from download of Pro / Con Review – Saving Unitarian Universalism (savethe7principles.org)</p> <p>The 3rd covenant statement of Section C 2.2 states:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect. <p>Comment:</p> <p>Instead of our individual search for meaning and truth, we covenant to learn from one another.</p>
<p>A. The Sources</p>	<p>This section no longer lists the specific sources but contains only a summary. Critics prefer the specific lists from which modern Unitarian Universalism has emerged as these are themselves, a rich, thoughtful list of where we have come from and what we value. This eliminates specific mention of Christian, Jewish, earth-centered, humanist, and prophetic people.</p>